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THE HISTORIAN AND TRUTH[1]

HISTORY is a science. It seeks the "truth." But science is in quest of laws; history is content with describing the particular. What kind of particular? What is in the particular?

To the historian the truth of a description means in practice its concordance with a kind of reality, the "historical reality." To him the problem of truth is the problem of this historical reality and its specific character. To him this question is independent from and prior to the other problem—how to verify the truth. The historian can not detach from his subject-matter, ere he starts, those areas or layers that lend themselves conveniently to specific demands of a scientific method and forget about the others. Thus he can not share the general belief in the sovereignty of the scientific method over the subject-matter. To him the method does not determine the subject-matter; the subject-matter determines the method. He can not assume beforehand that the joints at which the subject-matter should be divided are those suggested by his

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preference for reliable verification. In devotion to a subject-matter whose specific texture he must respect, he develops methods that are neither less elaborate nor less exacting than those of the experimental method.

If to the historian truth means first of all truth about a definite reality, what is this reality? I base my reasoning on the historiographer proper, who describes the course of events; on the great historian, who seems to have achieved something; on what he does in practice, not on what he says in theory, as his theoretical utterances may depend upon the philosophy of his day and not coincide with his practice.

He selects a topic. But there is a limitation: his subject-matter is a piece of human life. By belonging to the past, a fact does not thereby become an historical fact. The movement of cotton prices in Alabama from 1840 to 1850, if isolated and seen in an abstract cosmos of prices, is material for history, not history itself. Only in the history of man do cotton prices move along with other things. The historian is concerned with the rôle these movements of cotton prices played in the changing life of these changing men. Even languages, institutions, religions, though they certainly have a history, are in themselves not "historical facts"; only in the human context can their history be written; here only are they concrete. Whatever topic is selected, the reference to human life remains silently present—as question imposed upon the historian by the subject-matter itself.

The historian wants to report how things actually happen, "Wie es gewesen ist," as Ranke put it, or "to represent things truly," as Thomas Madox put it. Thus he starts with a multiplicity of "facts." What guides his selection? He selects the causally relevant and omits the ineffectual as irrelevant. So we are told. The beauty of a lady becomes a fact of American history when Alexander Hamilton falls in love with her. But the word "causality" is loosely used. The so-called chain of causes and effects is merely a first illusion of the historian. If such a chain means a chain of events in time, in which each preceding link is the cause of the following as its effect, no historian has ever succeeded in constructing such a chain. Between any two links there are countless others. Any such chain has an inexhaustible inner infinity. Even if it did not, none could be isolated, even for a short stretch. Each event has as effect thousands of causes, as cause thousands of effects.

The causality of the historian is not the causality of such chains. An historical occurrence emerges from the past and operates on the future. The historian shows in the way he reports the course

of events the field of historical forces and their constellation, the dynamic situation in which the events occur. Such a dynamic field is far from simple. It changes under the impact of the events. It has many layers, some changing so slowly that they seem to be permanent, others so quickly that their changes seem to be single events. The different layers and their changes interact. In the course of the concrete events the historian describes, all the historical forces of the dynamic situation entwine, in a way unique in each case. We can not identify all these forces by name. They include not only mountains and gods, institutions and machines, mentalities of collectivities, power of passions and words, interests and ideas, but this powerful man here and now and his dark heart as well. This dynamic field, the fabric of slowly or quickly moving forces, is the causality of the historian, though he may talk in terms of causal chains. After all, only by virtue of such a dynamic field do events become causes—everywhere and not only in history. The historian, by reporting the course of events and constructing always abbreviated and never accurate causal chains, describes indirectly the dynamic field and its movement. For the sake of this description he selects this and omits that datum from a multiplicity of data.

If this is the case, the historian will and must sometimes report facts that in one way or another are representative of the forces in the historical field, though as occurrences they may be without relevant effect. The historian may occasionally report an anecdote. Many a modern looks down on Herodotus, the father of history-writing, because his history seems to be sometimes merely a sequence of such anecdotes. We should bear him no grudge, however, even if we suspect some of his anecdotes are not precisely true. The representative value of his anecdotes is rather high. Some are representative of the dynamic fields, even of a "general movement" in which the East overflows the West and recedes again.

Thucydides says about his famous speeches that he was unable to ascertain the actual working of all, though even in such cases the speeches he reports could or should have been made by these men in these situations. Some of these speeches, masterpieces of rhetoric, are certainly not the actual speeches. In general, statesmen, envoys, soldiers are not so articulate. Most of ours, their ghost writers included, are not. These speeches obviously should bring to light the dynamics of men and things in each situation and this they do, in some cases perhaps better than the speeches actually made.

The historical legend is a particular case. If the truth is that

Luther at the Diet of Worms uttered only a simple "no" in a low and hesitant voice, instead of his famous "*hier stehe ich; ich kann nicht anders,*" the legend may be thought to be more representative. For this reason the historian may report the legend; however, if he is cautious, merely as a legend. It may be that the timid "no" is more representative for the particular man and the particular situation and tells the deeper story. Even in this case the birth of the legend can be representative too. In most cases the real facts are richer—and queerer—than anything man can invent, though their riches are hidden. The particular in the particularity of its historical context is inexhaustible.

It can happen that the inaccurate facts of one historian tell a true story about the dynamic field, whereas the accurate facts of another tell a false story or none at all. This, however, is not due to any mystical intuition. There is no doubt that Jacob Burckhardt's *Griechische Kulturgeschichte* is far superior to all other such attempts, though the evidence he presents, faulty in many instances, is open to philological criticism. This does not mean that he had no evidence but that the evidence he presented is not precisely that from which he derived his answers. He was not a philologist; he read the sources with a mind trained by the study of many a culture, asked the relevant questions, and found the right answers, though this and that particular evidence does not prove what he thought it proved.

The dynamic field is only a modest and incomplete answer to our immodest question about the why of the single event. This answer does not establish a must. Not everything that actually happens has been probable, let alone necessary. Sometimes even the improbable happens in history; rather frequently indeed if the "improbable" is meant relatively to the knowledge of the present situation we actually possess; less frequently if it is meant relatively to the maximum knowledge a finite intellect can possess; perhaps even in rare cases if it is meant relatively to a perfect knowledge of the present a divine observer may have. The historian avoids dogmatic preassumptions about the structure of his subject-matter. His main temptation and his capital sin against concrete history is to draw conclusions from the actual to its probability, from the probable to its necessity. Things are not so simple. In each dynamic field the necessary and the contingent permeate each other in different and changing ways and mixtures. The particularity of their mixture is even the most relevant particularity of the "structure" of such a dynamic field. It changes the day war is declared. It is different in the age of Charlemagne and in the last two centuries of the Roman empire in

the West. It is as if history went on changing the boards of the children's games or slot machines in which a ball rolls from nail to nail, to this or that hole or exit. Sometimes the acting man has but a narrow range of possibilities; little differences matter a great deal and diverging boundaries of the board widen the range of possible consequences. Sometimes the range of initial alternatives for action seems wide but converging boundaries force the rolling ball along different ways to the same exit. Hence the historian should not assume necessities in advance of his finding; perhaps he should be rather cautious in using sentences beginning with "because." It may even be that an all-knowing God writing the history of man, the great fool, for human readers would begin many a sentence with "nevertheless" and in doing so might accurately describe the foolishness of man as part and parcel of a history that is the history of man, not God.

The historian is in love with the particular. The dynamic field too is a particular one—this configuration of these forces in these men and things. When the steppes dry up, the cattle die, and the children starve, it happens to a particular people which is ossified in ancestral habits or still flexible, in these fetters to this past, this country, these holy places and gods, with that particular power structure. Only in such a context does starvation become an historical fact. Hunger alone is repeatable, but hunger is never alone. A particular context of these stubborn things, men, and gods moves in a unique way from a unique past into a unique future.

The historian does not enumerate these forces or give them general names. He has no high opinion of such names as capitalism or nationalism; he may distinguish but he does not separate factors. He refers the one to the other—in one another they are effective. To him gods or their equivalents emerge in a world of potential hunger—hunger occurs in a world full of gods and ideas. To the historian nothing is the abstract universal. Only the particular is really real. His practice, devotion to his subject-matter, cures him quickly of any theories about general priorities of interests over ideas or of ideas over interests. His priorities change in history.

The historian reports the course of events, sequences of facts in time. Owing to the relevance of his facts and his ways of reporting, the dynamic field and its movement becomes more or less visible. His narrative is more or less transparent. As, however, his view of the dynamic field may be faulty, though his facts may be accurate, or vice versa, it is useful to distinguish between two objects of the truth he seeks: the truth about the naked facts and

the truth about the dynamic field suggested by or transparent in these facts. The aim of the historian is neither the one nor the other of these truths separately but the transparency of the second in the first. Though this seems relatively simple, of course it is not. The term "dynamic field" hides many difficulties. The conscious and professed intention of the historian may end here. The highest aim he admits may be to describe truly conspicuous events showing the dynamic field in its movement from its past to its present. He may sometimes look beyond the individual historical form he describes and strain his eyes to discover in the wandering fogs at least some recognizable contours of a piece of *allgemeiner geschichtlicher Bewegung* of a greater period, as Ranke did, and let the feudal state of the Middle Ages grow into the absolute monarchy and the absolute monarchy into the national state or anything else of the same order of magnitude. But whatever his intention, wittingly or unwittingly, in his very devotion to and compelled by the particularity of his subject-matter, he reaches another truth and achieves another transparence—unless his interest for those general movements or a concern for the meaning of the historical process as a whole transfers his concern from the inner life of the particular to the construction of rôles or meanings in such a general movement or the historical process as a whole.

What is—in concreto—such a dynamic field? A last hope drives the ancestors of the ancient Egyptians from the expanding desert into the still uninhabitable swamps of the Nile. For centuries they wrestle with the River for some pieces of fertile soil. The particular situation requires and finally elicits an organized effort: power, command, compulsion. Kings arise, taxes, accountants, priests. The new power, chaining the River, reinterprets the world. In the image of this world man reinterprets his own existence. The interests of men, their needs, their ideas, norms, and gods grow in one another. A distinct way of life, an individual historical form, is established and strives to maintain itself. Man made it. In its frame man moves, either patiently in fixed habits or lugging and tugging at its fetters. The historian tries to describe it in its particularity—this River behaving differently from all other rivers, these strange gods, rôles of the dead, institutions—unique particularities. In his description the dynamic field, a constellation of forces and factors, geographic, economic, social, political, ideological, comes to life. But it has never been anything else than the answer to men and to the things and the response of the things to that answer.

As in the narrative of the historian, the events proceed one after the other, partly dependent, partly independent, of one

another, and the many forces and factors of the many-layered dynamic fields entwine, it happens that in this narrative a third kind of truth becomes visible. Though this third kind of truth can not be separated from the event and the forces in the field and hence is difficult to identify separately, it is different and should be distinguished. By virtue of this second transparence the mere events and factors are no longer merely objective things in an order of the many things in space and time; they are seen and are what they are by virtue of the rôle they play or the functions they have in the life of man. Here is their concrete reality. The absolute *potestas* of the Roman *pater familias* is no longer an institution in an institutional realm, to be defined by its *differentia specifica.* If it were, it would be but an abstraction, lifeless and dead. It is what it is in the context of Roman life. It would be something entirely different in the family of today. The historian looks through the things as things to the particular human context in which these institutions and passions and dreams of man entwine with these things and gods, to this kind of misery and happiness. The historian, devoted to the concrete particularity of his subject-matter, can not help avoiding any isolation and separation of any of these forces and factors we would like to analyze and study separately, thinking as we do of the dynamic field as a sort of aggregate of all these factors. They are forged together in the unity of a context; here they originate and here they change.

By the ambiguous terms "rôles" and "functions" I do not mean the "historical" rôle or function of a man, a thing, an event, in this or that development, in the success of a revolution or anything else of the kind in which the observer may be interested. Though Ranke says the rôle of the Byzantine Empire was to keep Asia from Europe, the Byzantines certainly did not think about their rôle. I do not mean such historical rôles. I mean rôles and functions in a context we call human life, though life here is not merely life in the mirror of biology.

This human context, in which the things are their rôles or functions, is again but a particular one—of this life in this country and age. But its particularity is no longer the particularity of the single facts and factors out of an indefinite multiplicity of possible facts and factors of an objectified world. It is the particularity of a variation of human life that becomes manifest in the cloak of the historical conditions, institutions, things, words, events.

I may be permitted to call this particularity a third kind of truth—and the transparence of the facts and the dynamic field in which it becomes visible the second transparence. Historical descriptions differ widely in this second transparence. In some of

them man himself, concrete life, disappears completely in the process of the development of objective facts and abstract forces and factors.

The third particularity seems no less unique than the particular cloak of the historical conditions in which it becomes real. Yet as a variation of a definite context, the particular carries with it something that is no longer a particular: the structure of this context. We may learn from the strange peculiarity of a past life the peculiarity of our own way of life or of our own age of which we mostly are unaware. Thus we may learn something about *die Breite des Menschenwesens,* the broad range of human possibilities. It is, however, not only the stupid quantity of this range; in it and behind it something else becomes visible, though perhaps only dimly and at a remote distance, and shines through the narrative of the historian: the unity of a context, the fabric of man's existence, the tissue of many strands, as the frame no history can transgress, within whose iron bounds all developments develop and all evolutions evolve.

Thus in this second transparence the particular course of events in its dynamic field is a particular aspect of mutable man. In this aspect, however, a general context becomes visible, as a fourth kind of truth in a third kind of transparency. It is the context in which man binds himself in the deeds he does, the words he creates, the power he establishes, in which he starves and cares and reaches out for gods or their equivalents. Restless man, who only for a short time and never entirely is what he could be, can be what he wants to be, wants to be what he ought to be, forever on his way in between "is," "can," "will," "must," "ought," and many other such "in betweens," knowing and ignorant, fearful and greedy, full of care and careless, potentially the most magnificent and the meanest of all animals. I call it for the moment the "eternal humanum."

This humanum is not human nature as the term is used in scientific treatises which distinguish inherited and acquired traits; it is not the "human being," let alone the organism, not life in the mirror of biology. It is not the individual as individual. It is historical man, man as he moves and is moved in the movement of history. There is no other man. Man is mutable, the "humanum" is but the eternal frame of his mutability. It is not the usual universal of a class, a species, a genus of beings, let alone an essence in a realm of essences. It is the universal context, present in all situations and their changes. I could call it, in the language of Michel de Montaigne, *l'entière forme de la condition humaine.* I could call it, using the language of geometry, the topology of the

human space, present as unity of a context in all the countless figures of all the possible euclidean and noneuclidean spaces. It is in all the dynamic fields, and none of their changes can transgress its rules.

However, the topological axioms of the human space are unknown to man. Goethe says in a poem: *das Besondere ist das Allgemeine.* This proposition, though meaningless, has a meaning. This universal humanum becomes visible only in the inner richness of the particular. Here it becomes concrete. "Concretum" stems from "concrescere." The particular is concrete by virtue of the many forces, relations, factors grown together in its particularity. No scientific isolation and separation of factors ever reaches this concreteness of life in the particular.

The historian does not make this humanum the context of any proposition. We may sense it or see it with an inner eye. Such feeling or sensing may not be at all the conscious intention of the historian. He simply can not help himself, though he may not know what he does and only describes ever mutable man. It happens to us in reading or to the great historian in writing—to his own astonishment—and prompts him to confess in the middle of his devotion to the particularity of this mutable man, that, after all, man is what he always has been and ever will be. This happened to Jacob Burckhardt.

Hence we may understand that Thucydides not only pretended to have written but really wrote a *ktema eis aei,* a thing forever. Whatever his reasons for his belief, it is by virtue of the transparence of an eternal humanum, in a transient particular gone forever.

Modern man no longer lives in the world of his grandfathers. We know it. The space in which we move has moved and goes on moving. Motion in motion is difficult in many respects. Historical consciousness is born when a society realizes that the space in which it moves moves. Many identify historical consciousness with history. But this consciousness of history is itself a product of history. As man, aware of this awkward motion in motion, may easily lose his balance, he tries to extend the order whose idea should guide and support him into the unknown future. When the timeless gods desert him, he contrives a philosophy of history that pretends to know or to be able to interpret the meaning of the universal process. This is a natural, politically efficient though theoretically vain effort.

But how should the historian, himself standing in history, not sitting outside it on the throne of a divine observer, describe motion in motion? What is his frame of reference? His own ephemeral age and its prospective activities? The historian may not

ask the question and may not have a theoretical answer. Objective nature—the mountains which stand still and the trees which become green again—is but his apparent frame of reference. His real frame is that "humanum" or the wide or narrow, rich or poor image of it he or his age may cherish. Though he does not even try to formulate this image, he can not help indicating its width or narrowness, richness or meagerness, and in it his own measure.

Under a twofold aspect the historian looks at the confused and ever-changing spectacle of history. Under the one aspect things, posited as objective, identified in an order of an objective world, stand still and cling to their identity. Against their unmoving background restless man alters but their meanings, rôles, functions. This is the natural aspect of our daily life. Under the other aspect these things are what they are only by virtue of human uses, rôles, functions, meanings which, though invested in or carried by changing things, are as mere rôles and functions fundamentally the same. They have their place in the same humanum which is forever fire—though here flaring and blazing, there glowing dimly under the ashes, it changes but the color and the shape of the flame.

When in the work of the great historian the two aspects blend, he succeeds in an astonishing feat: he makes manifest the eternal humanum in the change of mutable things, the ever mutable man in the quiet permanence of objective things. Though his image of man, narrower or broader, may be the historian's secret frame of reference, he need not answer or even pretend to answer the question "What is man?" It may even be that he denies that such a question has a meaning and be content to show how mutable man, in the course of his history, builds up and tears down and varies and revises his images of "eternal man." In all these images man is identified by his place in, or is described in terms of, an historical world—the Christian, the Greek, the Chinese image of the cosmos of many things, one of which is man. To the historian none of these worlds is absolute, though each has been posited as absolute. They come to be and pass away in history. Thus if there is any eternal humanum, mutable man lays hands on it only in terms of his own mutable images of a mutable world.

The historian, confronted with the paradox of a knowledge of man he must presuppose and can not claim, escapes into an historical relativism—in theory. Yet it may be that the inner life of the particularity to which he is devoted forces his practice to transgress his theory.

Of these mutable images some are wide, others narrow; some are rich, others poor; some are more, others less, articulate. Though all are images in terms of an historical cosmos and easily weave the image of what man should be into the image of what he

is, they are unequal, containing more or less knowledge. Though man need not be what he says he is, even the words by which he deceives himself can tell a story. Moreover, his deeds are more honest than his words. As there is more or less knowledge in these images, though they may be mere opinions, the knowledge of that eternal humanum has a history in which not only opinions change but knowledge grows and decays. There is more knowledge of man in the Greek than in the Germanic mythology. Thucydides knows more than others. Shakespeare's knowledge is greater than Dryden's. Shakespeare's favorite author was Michel de Montaigne. But Montaigne, though he pretends merely to describe the only subject he knows, himself, Michel de Montaigne, *l'homme particulier,* succeeds in making transparent "the entire condition of man" as, proceeding from one particularity to another, he uses and refers to the whole body of inherited knowledge he got from the ancients.

Thus it may still be that the historian, his relativism notwithstanding, by virtue of his devotion to the particularity of a bygone past, loosens the fetters that tie him to the narrow image of man of his own ephemeral age and becomes a knower not only of man's changing opinions but of an eternal humanum, of which these mutable images are the mutable aspects. As this knowledge grows with his knowledge of history, he may in practice be a great interpreter of an eternal humanum which he denies in theory.

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